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ABSTRACT

Although international students studying in the United States are identified as a high risk group under considerable stress, counseling services which meet their special needs are few and generally ineffective. American counselors have not been trained to provide effective support to clients whose cultural values differ from their own, and often their efforts have been counterproductive. As a result, the use of counseling services by international students has been minimal. Instead, these students turn to other internationals for help in solving their personal problems, a situation which hinders the students' adaptation to the host culture and the development of their own independence. However, while cross-cultural counseling is difficult, it is not impossible. Research has shown that effective cross-cultural counseling can occur if counselors emphasize the total personhood of the client in terms of the client's culture rather than their own. Empathy, congruence, positive regard, and openness of communication between counselor and client are also essential to effective counseling. To achieve this, counselor training should include courses and practical experience in cross-cultural counseling. (FL)

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COUNSELING APPROPRIATENESS: AN EXPLORATION FROM A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Jane H. Walter

At least one-fourth of the world's foreign students typically study in the United States. The most recent statistics indicate that approximately 220,000 studied in the United States in 1976-77 (IIE, 1978). The international student's highest priority is to obtain an academic degree as a symbol of achievement. This goal appears so encompassing that personal happiness during this period is considered somewhat of a luxury (Alexander and others, 1976).

The more recent works do, however, emphasize the need to examine the forms of adaptation of international students in regard to socio-psychological factors (Skinner and Hendricks, 1977; Pederson, 1976; Tan, 1975). In fact, the lack of personal/social guidance has been cited as a major problem by foreign students (Ursula, 1969). It has also been determined by several authorities that international students are less likely to take their stress-related problems to psychologist, psychiatrist, or counselors than their American counterparts (Pederson, 1976; Tinlov, 1975; Seigal and Clarke, 1975).

The academic success of the international student is often, however, contingent upon many factors unrelated to scholastic ability (Lee, 1973). Since the utilization of community and university resources by the internationals has been quite limited, a study of coping strategies to the new environment seems appropriate.

Coping behavior is the behavior utilized by foreigners to establish emotional security within culture distinct from their own (Coelho, 1973).

According to Skinner and Hendricks (1975), "the individual international student tends to operate within a limited social field, which primarily includes people who play instrumental roles in the student's strategy for coping" (p. 125). The concept of support systems[1] has received limited attention except in the area of social isolation[2] (Kang, 1971; Cohen, 1971; Gandhi, 1970; Hegazy, 1968). Although different support systems are established in the new environment, i.e. academic advisors, foreign student advisors, American friends, fellow countrymen, the broad range of counseling services is often not considered (Pederson and others, 1976). Furthermore, international students typically are not aware of this relevant information or possible resources available through counseling services. The failure to seek counseling may be based on three key premises:

1. Counseling is an unfamiliar concept (Pederson, 1976; Ho, 1974)
2. Counselors are considered authoritarian (Tan, 1967)
3. Counseling does not fit into their support systems (Barnes, 1976).

Because of these reasons, it is important that problem areas considered appropriate for counseling, according to internationals, be studied so that counseling may become a major component of the support system.

Although international students are identified as a high risk group under considerable stress (Alexander, 1975), most counselors in the United States are not trained to provide effective counseling to this population. Morrow (1972) states that counselors are addicted to one system of cultural values which is counterproductive to effective counseling.

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[1]The various areas where individuals receive psychological strength.

[2]The tendency to remain with co-nationals.

There is further evidence that counseling of international students has been dysfunctional (Alvardo, 1976).

The situation of ineffective counseling stems primarily from the fact that counseling needs of international students are different and not well understood (Alvardo, 1976; Mestenhouser, 1976; Clarke, 1975; Vontress, 1969). Since the counseling needs are not well understood, counseling services offered are not adjusted to these needs. As a result, the use of the counseling services by internationals has been minimal. As Lee (1973) stated only four out of one hundred foreign students surveyed at the University of Virginia had ever used the counseling center.

PERCEPTIONS OF COUNSELING

As stated by Sundberg (1976), foreign students are more likely to seek other foreign students to help them solve personal problems than professionals, but other foreign students may impede the adaptation to the host culture and the individual's sense of independence. The counselor, on the other hand according to Sundberg (1976) may "provide the antithesis to mainstream society -- offering a confidential non-critical acceptance in which the client can talk about his weaknesses, and dependence, and about taboo topics such as hate, sex, and egotism" (p. 155). Although counseling across cultures is difficult, there are still many commonalities. Sundberg states the following hypothesis:

> Despite great differences in cultural context, language, and in the implicit theory of counseling process, a majority of the important elements of intercultural counseling are common across cultures and clients. These elements include such counselor characteristics as a tolerance for anxiety in the client, a manifest positive flexibility in response to the client, a reasonable confidence in one's information and belief system, and an interest in the client as a person (p. 156).

The counseling situation has been considered an event in intercultural communications (Steward, 1973; Coelho, 1971). This relationship should be marked by empathy rather than by cultural differences. Empathy, according to Steward, protects the privacy of the client and relieves both client and counselor from making moral judgments. Mishler (1976) believes that when personalities are predisposed to respond more favorably to cultural differences rather than perceived similarities fruitful cross-cultural interaction may occur.

Coelho (1973) used the counseling relationship as the dependent variable with language skills, culture-bound attitudes of the foreign student, and openmindedness of the American counselor as independent variables. Her findings reported no correlation between the degree of counselor openmindedness and ratings of counselor empathy and warmth. A low correlation was found, however, between client vocabulary and cultural closeness scores and ratings of counselor genuiness and client depth of exploration.

Barriers

In examining racial and ethnic barriers, Vontross (1975) stated that "the more a special population is set apart physically and psycholologically from the dominant group, the more a counselor is apt to experience language difficulties when attempting to communicate with its members" (p. 43). He continues to emphasize the total personhood of the client as defined in terms of the client's culture not the counselor's.

The establishment of shared values and expectations seems particularly appropriate in a cross-cultural counseling situation. Sundberg (1975) stated that "counseling, in a sense, is a cultural solution to

the problem of problem-solving" (p. 140). He belives that the more similar expectations for client and counselor, the more effective is the counseling. Additional variables considered important are the degree of congruency towards dependency and openness of communication.

Two studies have analyzed the perceptions of internationals to counselors. In a study involving Mexican-Americans and Anglo-Americans in a counseling situation, the ethnic affiliation and sex of the client were the most powerful factors in determining the way counselors were perceived (Alvardo, 1976). He further concludes that the cultural background of the counselor appears to have a limited effect on the client's perception. Cross-cultural counseling may have, in fact, a facilitative effect in the perception of the counselor. In a similar study Dias (1971) compared the effectiveness of two groups of counselors (American and foreign) in counseling foreign students over a four-week period. The conclusions indicated that foreign students, 1) perceived American counselors as more empathetic and effective than foreign counselors, 2) changed their perceptions of the USA more favorably than those non-counseled, 3) identified more with foreign counselors and became more achievement motivated than those counseled by American counselors, 4) and foreign counselors liked one another more than foreign students and American counselors, and 5) with American counselors evaluated counseling sessions and performed on adjustment indices better than those with foreign counselors.

Sue and Sue (1972) expressed concerns that the value conflicts of Asian clients and non-Asian therapist create many problems in the counseling setting. Tinlov (1972) suggested that counselor training should include courses and practical experience in cross-cultural counseling.

Empathy, congruence, and positive regard are insufficient without a personal knowledge of cultures (Tinlov, 1978).

Vontress (1978) exposed an existential view of transcultural counseling, which is a philosophical approach to the human existence. He suggested that introspection about nature, fellowman, self, and their relationship to being in the world is necessary if American counselors are to be effective in a cross-cultural situation.

> "Involvement with terminally ill and the elderly might be one vehicle for helping counselors see through the trivia of life which set people apart. Their new version ought to enable them to be accepting of and helpful to all human beings in the world, no matter what their cultural roots happen to be" (p. 10).

In the absence of such understanding, obvious communication barriers will impede the counseling process.

In conclusion, the nature of counseling, thus, is even more complex in a cross-cultural situation. Although most professional counselors are trained to meet the psychological needs of the middle-class Americans, there is little evidence that selection and training of such counselors facilitate counseling with individuals from different racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups. Additionally, international students possess values, attitudes, and life styles that are different from and threatening to counselors.

The American Psychological Association recommended at their 1973 conference that counseling of persons of culturally diverse backgrounds by persons not trained to work with such groups should be regarded as unethical (Pederson, 1976).

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